

## **PENNY SAVER NEWS**

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### Fiber Does What?

Back in Grandma's day, fiber was roughage, and its job was to "keep us regular". Now we have at least a dozen different sources of fiber, and claims of more than a dozen different 'health benefits' that they provide. But in a Nutrient Data box on a food label, it all goes on the one line "Dietary Fiber". How are you to know what the fiber in that package will, or won't, do for you? If you can find the fiber in the Ingredients List at least you can have some idea of what it might do. Here are the main ones.

We'll start with Grandmother's idea of "keeping us regular". In today's medical terms, that's called 'laxation' (like a laxative, right?). There are half a dozen fiber types to do that for us. They could show up on an ingredient list as any of these: cellulose, polydextrose, psyllium, resistant starch, wheat bran, inulin, oligofructose or a few more. Basically all fibers work because they are not digested. They just keep right on going through our intestines, picking up water as they go. They come out the other end pretty quickly and easily, soft and squishy. And we don't need a laxative!

These are all made naturally by plants from glucose, fructose or other sugars. Because of the way they are strung together we can not digest them, even though they're basically sugars. Inulin is mostly extracted from chicory root or Jerusalem artichokes. Cellulose is what gives plants their stiffness. A piece of wood is almost pure cellulose. Termites can digest cellulose, but we can't. So don't eat wood!

Another benefit of many fibers, one that Grandmom didn't know about, is that they can help lower our cholesterol and triglycerides. Those that do this are a slightly different list: oats, barley, chitin, guar gum, pectin, psyllium and resistant dextrins. Inulin might help a little at this job too. Chitin is the only one that is not a plant fiber. It's extracted from crab shells or other shellfish. All the others are still based mostly on sugar- glucose or less common ones such as galactose. Plants make them naturally.

They also work very much like the first group, swelling up in our intestines. But as they swell they absorb cholesterol and bile acids like a sponge and carry them out our other end. Keep eating them over time, and pretty soon the amount of cholesterol you have in your blood starts going down.

The third big job of fiber is to help keep our blood glucose from going up too far or too fast. Because they swell up like sponges in the intestines they interfere with the digestion of regular starch and sugar. That means that the sugars from our meals don't all get dumped quickly into our blood. Instead they trickle in a little at a time. So our blood sugar doesn't go high really fast. This can make a huge difference for a person with diabetes. It can help people with pre-diabetes avoid getting diabetes too.

The fibers that are most useful for blood sugar control include: oat bran, barley, guar gum, pectins, resistant dextrins, resistant starch, and soluble corn fiber. Resistant dextrins mostly come from corn and wheat. Resistant starches are found in many plants, including potatoes. Guar gum is from seeds, pectin from apples and oranges.

All of these fibers could be used by manufacturers for many other reasons than our health. Some help thicken sauces and soups. Some, like guar gum, could be used to keep ice cream from crystallizing. Inulin, polydextrose, cellulose and the resistant starches are often used to take up space in a recipe when a low-calorie sweetener is used instead of sugar. Some are used instead of fat in low-fat foods. They could be used to keep foods moist, or crisp. Some keep pie meringues from 'weeping'.

No matter why the manufacturer put them in his recipe, inside us they still help keep us healthy. Here's a super simple recipe to give you some healthy plant fibers.

#### Colorful Florida Coleslaw

2 cups fat-free sour cream	1 envelope onion soup mix
1 bag coleslaw mix shredded cabbage	4 carrots, peeled and grated
1 green bell pepper, chopped	4 tsp cider vinegar

Combine the sour cream and soup mix in large bowl and mix well. Add all other ingredients, stir to mix. Cover and chill at least 1 hour or until serving. Serves 8.